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<http://edhtelegraph.com/detail/139404.html>

While other young men are completely absorbed with the competition they find on XBoxes and Wii platforms, eight lads from the Folsom area have pooled their wits to attempt to win it all in the Northern California division of the First Lego League.

Since 1998 the toy company has partnered with educators to get 9 to 14-year-olds more interested in science, technology and engineering. Throughout the world there are 13,000 teams in 50 countries. Northern California has its own league and these kids - who call themselves the Legonauts - are among the pacesetters in the 48-member NorCal division.

In two previous competitions the Legonauts have scored first and second places with their Lego robot and innovative ideas for future transportation matters.

On Saturday, Jan. 16, they'll travel to Newark in the Bay Area to compete against the other 47 teams in hopes of winning a chance to go to the U.S. finals in Atlanta in April.

The seven team members and their mentor get together to "practice" once or twice a week, more often when a competition looms. They include Ankhith Pandurangi, 14, Rohan Deshpande, 14, Nikhil Kotha, 14, Vikram Manja, 14, Praveen Mannava, 13, Amit Talreja, 12, Nihar Khare, 12, and mentor Pawan Mannava, 15.

For their research they either contacted or visited transportation companies and agencies such as CalTrans to get ideas about designing a city and system that could make the most of its

transportation assets and come up with Smart Moves, this year's First Lego League theme.

On Jan. 4 they visited Congressman Dan Lungren's district office in Gold River to seek his input on federal transportation, and to demonstrate what their project and their 6-inch by 6-inch robot does in the competitions.

"This is terrific," said Lungren, as each of the seven boys explained a portion of the project and one gave a brief demo of their Lego robot's capabilities. "We need to get more youths like you deciding you want to become engineers."

The model city the boys created with Legos features municipal services in close proximity to allow for shorter commutes and wiser use of transportation. But Lungren gingerly cautioned the boys about placing an airport too close to residential centers.

"What about the noise?" he asked. "What you learn in government is that you have plans, but you have to have plans that work with people."

The Legonauts valued the feedback, according to their mentor.

"They were very excited and they were happy with the interaction," said Ajay Pandurangi, the adult coach of Team Legonaut and an Intel employee who has worked with the kids for some time. "They really enjoyed their visit."

Pandurangi hopes other youth in the community will follow his group's example and create their own team. And now is a perfect time to get started. Many teams form and get under way in January in preparation to build their robots and prepare their plans for competitions.

The team's other adult mentor is Dhananjay Khare, who works for DST in El Dorado Hills.

To learn more about the program, visit norcalfill.org. You can also consult the Web site to see how the boys did in their competition Jan. 16.

~ Staff report